

Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women Pittsfield Public Hearing

Report

*On June 28, 2000,
the Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women
held its second public hearing,
in Pittsfield, Massachusetts,
at Girls Incorporated.*

*The purpose of this hearing was to
listen to the concerns of
women and organizations in the Berkshires.*

*The Commission hopes that the
comments, feedback, and input of the participants
will help us focus on some of the most pressing concerns
facing women in our state.*

Attendees

Commissioners

Mary Ann Glendon
Frances Hogan
Mary Reardon Johnson
Roseanna Means

Staff

Priscilla Golding
Heidi Kruckenberg

Participants from the Community

Maria Ahlin, BCFC Redfield House
Rachel Birch, Berkshire United Way
Susan Birns, World March of Women, Berkshire
Dona Burdick
Amanda Esko
Holly A. Farrar, Springfield North WIC
Merle Ferber, Commission on Berkshire Women
Cindy Glendon
Mary Glendon
Charlotte Harrington, Massachusetts NOW
Jennifer Jackson, Child Care of the Berkshires
Starlene Lang, Berkshire North WIC
Brenda Lopez, Springfield Women's Commission
Molly Mattessich, Massachusetts NOW
Katy Miller, World March of Women, Berkshire
Sarah O'Dell, Berkshire United Way
Deb Parkington, Elizabeth Freeman Center
Diane M.G. Parsons, North Adams City Council
Carol Purcell, League of Women Voters
Sally Jo Restivo, Berkshire Business and Professional Women
Patricia Sanders, Massachusetts NOW
Marcia Savage, Elizabeth Freeman Center
Allison Stokes, Women's Interfaith Institute
Jennifer Stokes, The Kids' Place
Judy Stolzberg, Pittsfield Public Schools
Jeanette Thomas, Y2Kids and Berkshire Talking Chronicle
Samantha Thomas
Melissa A. Walsh, Massachusetts NOW
Carol Wolfgram
Elizabeth Wright, League of Women Voters of Williamstown

Opening Remarks

Welcome and Introduction by Commissioner Roseanna Means

Ms. Means welcomed everyone to the public hearing. After giving an overview of the Commission, its history, and its mission, Ms. Means introduced the Commissioners and staff in attendance. Ms. Means closed her remarks by outlining the agenda for the evening and discussing the ground rules for testimony.

Summary of Testimony

*Summaries based on: note-takers' notes from the meeting,
staff listening to the audiocassette recording of the testimony,
and written testimony.*

Elizabeth Wright

League of Women Voters of Williamstown

Ms. Wright testified in support of gender neutral insurance. She explained that twenty-four years ago the Equal Rights Amendment to the Massachusetts Constitution was ratified. After four years most statutes were amended to bring them into conformity with the Equal Rights Amendment. The only remaining discrimination to be corrected is that of gender discrimination in insurance policies. Ms. Wright spoke about the current discrimination in insurance policies faced by women in Massachusetts. She pointed out that women pay the same premiums for health insurance policies but receive fewer benefits than men because coverage for female-specific conditions are often omitted. All male conditions are covered. The discrimination costs women as much as 68% more in out-of-pocket expenses. Ms. Wright said that the passage of S. 2043 will give Massachusetts consumers the following benefits:

- \$4 million per year in increased annuities to retired women so that they receive the same amount as men who buy similar policies
- \$5 million per year in increased life insurance savings paid out to older women, equaling what men receive with the same policies
- medical insurance that covers all medical conditions unique to each sex so that men's and women's reproductive needs are covered equally
- disability income insurance, now costing women up to 50% more than men, that includes coverage for normal pregnancy with no additional premium over that charged to men.

Written testimony on file.

Sally Jo Restivo

Berkshire Business and Professional Women (BPW)

Ms. Restivo is a member of Berkshire Business and Professional Women and editor of the BPW Massachusetts' *Bay State News*. The national BPW is the most experienced working women's organization in the country. The BPW is dedicated to achieving full

participation in the workforce, equity, and economic self-sufficiency for women. Ms. Restivo came before the Commission to ask that it join the BPW in supporting two bills: Senate Bill 2043 To Prohibit Discrimination in Insurance and Senate Bill 61/House Bill 1890 regarding Massachusetts Paid Parental Leave for All Working Parents. Ms. Restivo discussed both bills briefly. The BPW is seeking legislative support to get these bills released with committee support and passed before the legislative session ends next month.

Written testimony on file.

Jeanette Thomas

Y2Kids and Berkshire Talking Chronicle

Ms. Thomas has a number of concerns based on the work she has been doing. She is the Executive Director at the Berkshire Talking Chronicle for the Visually Impaired in Dalton, a radio reading service for the visually impaired. She asked for the Commission's support for all issues relating to the disabled. Ms. Thomas is also the Founder of Y2Kids, which worked with the state of Massachusetts on Y2K issues as they related to municipalities and also with the President's Council on Year 2000 Conversion.

Ms. Thomas also has a background in macrobiotic health care and natural health care. Under the issue of health care, Ms. Thomas requested the Commission's support in looking extensively into natural approaches to health. Other health issues that concern Ms. Thomas are: food, particularly the importance of eating locally-produced food; safe drinking water and natural waste water treatment processes; and oil issues that affect the economy as well as our ability to eat.

Ms. Thomas believes that "no amount of posturing can hide the fact that our present economic systems are inadequate, unfair, and abusive to women and children. Violence against women is practiced by society everyday. The work and home life schedule women are forced to maintain for an economic reason is a silent form of violence against women. Children are abused as a result of this silent violence against women since mothers often have to put work schedules before the welfare of their children in order to provide food and housing."

Another issue that Ms. Thomas addressed is the need to have more meetings locally to give the Commission more feedback throughout the year. Ms. Thomas is also concerned about education, particularly: MCAS testing; family life and how it fits with children's education and homework; and what students are studying and whether it is applicable to life. Finally, Ms. Thomas pointed out that the day-to-day quality of women's lives is important. She said that she talked to many people in her Y2K work who were exhausted and could not think about long-term affects of Y2K. This exhaustion impacts women's health, eating, food quality, time with their children, etc. Lastly, Ms. Thomas is concerned about the incorporation of spiritually-based politics.

Written testimony on file.

Susan Birns***World March of Women, Berkshire***

Ms. Birns is a member of the local group, World March of Women, which is part of the World March of Women in the Year 2000. The World March of Women 2000 was sponsored initially by the Quebec Federation of Women, but is now supported by over 140 countries worldwide. The March is against poverty and seeks to call an end to violence against women globally. The March embraces the 1960s and 1970s slogan that “sisterhood is global” and is concerned about issues such as: female genital mutilation in Somalia, dowry death in India, the Taliban in Afghanistan, as well as what is happening to women in the United States, Massachusetts, and Berkshire County because they are all tied together. In recognition of this sisterhood being global, Ms. Birns asked the Commission to endorse the March by adding its name to the support list.

There will be three marches. The international march will take place on October 17, 2000, in New York City at the United Nations. The national march, coordinated by NOW at the national level, on October 15, 2000, in Washington, D.C. The local march will be October 3, 2000.

Katy Miller***World March of Women, Berkshire***

Ms. Miller is a social worker, employed by the Commonwealth. She has been involved with various women’s and community organizations. She spoke about the issues of poverty and violence. Working as a child protective social worker, Ms. Miller has seen that violence has become all-too-common in the lives of children. This is something that needs to be continually addressed in Massachusetts. There has been wonderful legislation passed to combat violence, but it is important to make sure the policy is carried out at the local level. In addition, Ms. Miller does not feel that there is enough intervention and crisis support for women and children facing violence. There is a lack of programming, staff, funding, and especially important is the low pay that staff receive.

In regard to the poverty issue, welfare reform has been viewed by some as successful since the enrollment is lower, but there are many families who have slipped through the cracks. Statistics can be used to support any argument, so it is important to pay attention to the numbers when you look at statistics about welfare reform. In her work in social services, Ms. Miller sees a need for a system that can provide a family with a little bit of help, rather than the all-or-nothing structure of welfare. Ms. Miller encouraged the Commission to look closely at welfare reform and what it has actually meant for the women and children in the Commonwealth.

Diane M.G. Parsons***North Adams City Council***

Ms. Parsons is a member of the North Adams City Council and she works at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts. Ms. Parsons has lived most of her life in Berkshire County. One message Ms. Parsons would like conveyed to the state

administration is to guard against geographic bias as well as gender bias. While the basic needs of women may be the same in Boston as in North Adams, she is aware of and sensitive to North Adams' remoteness from the capital of the state. Geographic remoteness is worse for those with limited means.

Ms. Parsons has been an activist for many years, working on issues such as child care, family planning, health care, and women in politics. In her experience, women advance mostly when they work together, reach consensus regarding a common goal, mobilize and collaborate with like-minded others, and pursue the objective with clarity and purpose. Women who educate and empower themselves are a positive force for good, but they need to be supported and recognized by those already in positions of power and in control of the public's money.

On the Commission's survey, Ms. Parsons indicated that the first priority for women is to achieve economic equity with male counterparts. Women entrepreneurs and professionals, as well as women transitioning from public assistance need to be supported. As she indicated on the survey, Ms. Parson's second priority is access to quality, affordable (even state supported) health care. She encouraged the Commission to support health care reform, especially single payer insurance. Her third priority was a tie between electing/selecting women to key political positions and eradicating violence against women. Ms. Parsons' experience running for public office has opened her eyes to the discouraging situation women face in politics. For this reason she sees public financing of campaigns to be a women's issue.

In conclusion, Ms. Parsons encouraged the Commission to link with other commissions, boards, and organizations that are doing women's advocacy.

Written testimony on file.

Marcia Savage
Elizabeth Freeman Center

Ms. Savage is the Executive Director of the Elizabeth Freeman Center, which deals primarily with women who have been victimized by domestic violence or sexual assault. Ms. Savage emphasized a few issues particularly relevant to rural women. First, isolating the victim is so much easier for the abuser in a rural area. Second, generational domestic violence is more prominent in rural communities and when a woman leaves a violent relationship she often leaves behind most of the supports she has had all her life. In other words, there are not many places for a woman to go where domestic violence has not marked the experience of the family. Third, the "small town phenomena," whereby people in authority look the other way on laws in order to protect their friends, is more powerful in rural areas. Given the above-mentioned items, Ms. Savage encourages the Commission to pay attention to legislation and how it affects rural domestic violence, not just urban or suburban domestic violence.

The other priority that Ms. Savage pointed out was the affect of domestic violence on children. She underscored the fact that there needs to be increased funding for this issue.

Within the domestic violence movement, focus on children is a fairly new area of interest. She proposed that funding for kids who are witnesses of domestic violence should come from the State Department of Public Health. The Reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act is another concern. Ms. Savage urged the Commission to do what it can to support and endorse this Reauthorization.

Ms. Savage explained that it is also important to keep teen dating violence within the definition of domestic violence. Especially in the context of college campuses, where students live together, violence within the household should be defined as domestic violence. Also, abuse within high school relationships, when the couples spend enormous amounts of time together, should qualify as falling under domestic violence. Ms. Savage is worried about this removal of dating violence from the area of domestic violence because then prevention will be removed from the equation. This might negatively impact funding for violence prevention.

Finally, Ms. Savage cited a few statistics: the Elizabeth Freeman Center hotline receives 5,000 calls a year, 10 to 15% of those calls are referrals; the total population of the Berkshires is 130,000 and falling, which makes the number of hotlines calls even more significant; there is only one battered women's shelter in the Berkshires; there is one safe house, but no transitional housing available to battered women in the Berkshires; and there are women coming into shelter with a multiplicity of problems: substance abuse, mental health issues, economic issues and so on.

Melissa A. Walsh

Massachusetts National Organization for Women (NOW)

Ms. Walsh works for the Massachusetts chapter of the National Organization for Women. She testified in support of the gender neutral insurance bill, S. 2043 and requested the Commission's support of this bill. Ms. Walsh explained that the enactment of S. 2043 will finally bring Massachusetts statutes into compliance with the state's Equal Rights Amendment, which was passed in 1976. Women in Massachusetts are victimized by discrimination in insurance, which results in higher premiums and fewer benefits. Discrimination is most egregious in disability insurance, where women pay higher premiums but get fewer benefits in return. Gender neutral insurance does not harm the insurance industry or women, as has been demonstrated in Montana, where gender neutrality has existed in insurance for over ten years, and in Massachusetts during 1988-1991 when all insurance policies were gender neutral. Now is the time for the legislature to act—S. 2043 has passed the Senate and now needs to be voted on upon by the House. Ms. Walsh concluded by urging the Commission to endorse the bill.

Merle Ferber

Commission on Berkshire Women

Ms. Ferber represents the Commission on Berkshire Women, although she also participates in other women's and disability advocacy groups. Ms. Ferber has lived in Berkshire County for 25 years. Ms. Ferber addressed the issue of inaccessibility at the Berkshire County Court House. She cannot serve jury duty due to the lack of accessible

facilities. But people with disabilities are also excused from jury duty, thus creating unbalanced jury representation for disabled women. She filed a complaint with the Department of Justice about this lack of compliance with the ADA.

Ms. Ferber discussed the fact that the Commission on Berkshire Women is fizzling because of the discontinuation of county governments in Massachusetts on July 1, 2000. Berkshire County will be disbanded on that date. She expressed interest in a revival of the Commission on Berkshire Women. She is concerned about the lack of younger women in women's advocacy work. She also spoke about women's lack of time and overall busy schedules.

Starlene Lang

Berkshire North Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)

Ms. Lang is the Community Coordinator for Berkshire North WIC. WIC is an important program that provides food supplements and nutrition education to women with infants and young children. Funding for WIC may be cut, and Ms. Lang is concerned about this. She asks the Commission to support WIC, especially concerning the funding issue. The WIC program should not be cut, but rather, should be increased to make it more useful for and attractive to families. Many women and working families are not taking advantage of WIC which affects the health and well-being of children. One main reason women do not use WIC is because after the baby outgrows formula, the mother needs to go to the WIC center by appointment, but lack of public transportation makes this difficult.

Second, Ms. Lang spoke about television and violence. She knows that some parents use TV as a babysitter, and have the TV on all day long. She is personally appalled by television's content and feels it has a negative impact on children. She would like to see more restrictions on TV, especially regarding violence. She sees a direct correlation between violence on TV and violence in relationships and therefore asks the Commission to address the issue of restricting violence on television.

Samantha Thomas

Becket

Ms. Thomas is a sixth-grade student at Nessacus Regional Middle School. Her first comment was that all poor people and people with disabilities should be helped first, especially women and children. When the Commissioners asked her for ideas about ways to help poor people and children, she mentioned having more things free-of-charge, such as swimming lessons.

Second, she disagrees with the MCAS testing because some kids have learning disabilities and teachers still make them take it. Also, some kids do not test well, but are still smart and try hard. The biggest issue with the MCAS is that students and their parents are worried that they will not pass the MCAS in high school.

Holly A. Farrar***Springfield North Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)***

Ms. Farrar is the Community Outreach Coordinator for Springfield North WIC. She began by saying that she thinks it is an absolute outrage that women, children, and men in this country and this Commonwealth are going without enough food, without health care, and without affordable housing. She sees these things as rights, not privileges. In Ms. Farrar's twelve years at WIC she has met many people who do not have enough to eat. Even after twelve years it still shocks her that in a society as wealthy as ours people should go hungry.

Ms. Farrar spoke about breastfeeding, which is a big part of WIC's program. She would love to see Massachusetts lead the way in promoting breastfeeding and making breastfeeding a public health policy. First, breastfeeding makes babies healthier and healthier children means: reduced health care cost and mothers missing less work time. Second, studies have shown that breastfed babies are smarter and have higher IQs. Ms. Farrar thinks more women would breastfeed if it was accepted in society. Women are embarrassed to breastfeed in public and the only remedy for this would be more women breastfeeding in public and people getting accustomed to seeing women breastfeeding in public. Finally, breastfeeding is more affordable for women in poverty. Formula is very expensive and WIC does not provide the full amount of formula needed for every baby, since babies have varying intakes. Some mothers dilute the WIC formula with cow's milk, which is less nutritious for babies. Therefore, encouraging breastfeeding would help women financially.

Sarah O'Dell***Berkshire United Way***

Ms. O'Dell works for Berkshire United Way. She spoke about three issues. First, clean elections are important to her. She worked on the Massachusetts Clean Elections Law several years ago. She feels that this law needs to be acted upon because current elections are not favorable to people unless they are of an upper income or connected to authority in some way.

Second, reproductive rights are important to Ms. O'Dell. She mentioned S. 733, which would provide insurance coverage of certain gynecological needs such as contraceptive needs and products. This is an issue of great importance to women everywhere, not just in Massachusetts, because it ensures women's essential right to be in control of their bodies. Another bill, S. 787, An Act for Legislation to Further Regulate Access to Abortions for Minors, would repeal the current law requiring minors to obtain parental consent or go through the judicial bypass system before receiving an abortion. Despite family abuse, rape, sexual assault, there may be women who do not feel comfortable obtaining an abortion. Therefore, Ms. O'Dell thinks that this ought to be a priority of the Commission.

Finally, Ms. O'Dell addressed the issue of same-sex domestic partnerships and same-sex marriages. Two bills, H. 3377 and S. 1208, would create statewide domestic partnership laws enabling state and municipal employees to receive workplace benefits for their domestic partners. This is incredibly important for women and men and is part of our human rights. Ms. O'Dell believes that this issue ought to be extremely important to the Commission on Women because it represents the needs of a constituency that is frequently underserved. Ms. O'Dell opposes H. 472, The Defense of Marriage Bill, which would prevent the Commonwealth from recognizing same-sex marriages performed in other states. This bill is discriminatory in every way and goes against the tremendous work that has been done in Vermont. Ms. O'Dell urged the Commission to direct its attention to these two bills to ensure equal rights for people with all sexual orientations.

Dona Burdick

Otis

Ms. Burdick lives in Otis, Massachusetts. She voiced her support of same-sex domestic partnerships. Ms. Burdick mentioned that buying cars jointly and obtaining health insurance and taxes is very difficult for her and her partner. The discrimination is monetary.

Issue Boards

Participants were invited to write anonymous comments on post-it notes and stick them to the appropriate Issue Board during the hearing.

The topics covered by the Issue Boards were: Child Care, Economic Development/Stability, Girls' Issues, Health Care, Violence Against Women, and Other.



Child Care

- ⇒ Affordable child care is imperative (lack of it is a huge road block for women trying to improve their economic situation)
- ⇒ Affordable, high quality day care

Economic Development/Stability

- ⇒ Recommended reading: “The Case Against the Global Economy and for a Move Toward the Local,” edited by Jerry Mander and others
- ⇒ Domestic partnership laws—support
- ⇒ Equal pay for equal work

Girls' Issues

- ⇒ Increased funding for teen dating violence (prevention)
- ⇒ Gender equity
- ⇒ Increase awareness of the link between child sexual assault and adult victimization
- ⇒ Increase in funding for programs which target girls
- ⇒ State funding/support for MA Chapter of Children's Advocacy Centers
- ⇒ I think that teen dating brings the parents and children to hate each other. I have a friend that is going through this.

Health Care

- ⇒ Single payer health care is terribly important to improve the lives of women and children. Why did the WHO find the U.S. ranked 37th in health statistics? Why does the richest country in the world refuse to see that all its citizens have health care? The U.S. is the only industrialized country in the world without universal health care.
- ⇒ Insurance single payer

- ⇒ Breastfeeding should be made a public health and economic priority in Massachusetts.
 1. Breastfed children are healthier, which means lower health care costs and less time out of work to care for sick children (moms and employers both benefit).
 2. Breastfeeding means not having to buy formula, which women in poverty cannot afford (WIC does not provide the full amount of formula needed by every baby—babies have varying intakes).
 3. Studies show breastfed babies have higher IQs, which means breastfed babies have a greater probability of becoming productive citizens who can contribute more to our society (economically and intellectually).
- ⇒ Single payer health insurance
- ⇒ Increase focus on women's reproductive rights—maintaining rights for choice especially with later term abortions
- ⇒ Please support the gender-neutral insurance bill. Women should be seen as individuals and not discriminated against because of their gender.
- ⇒ Please a national single payer health system!

Violence Against Women

- ⇒ Increased funding for programs working with children who witness domestic violence
- ⇒ Increased funding for families transitioning to a violence-free environment
- ⇒ Funding for rural programs for people who don't access services
- ⇒ Recommended reading "Connection Between Violence and Television: Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television" by Jerry Mander (also covers related mental and physical health issues)
- ⇒ VAWA Bill Reauthorization is vital
- ⇒ Increased funding for rural domestic violence programs
- ⇒ Free cap on distribution of VOCA funding Feinstein Bill

Other

- ⇒ I disagree with the MCAS testing because some kids have a learning disability and the teachers still make you take it. Also some kids do not test well, but are still smart and try hard. The biggest issue is children and their parents are worried that they won't pass the MCAS in the Middle School.
- ⇒ I think all poor people and people with disabilities should be helped first, and especially women and children.
- ⇒ Please support WIC program for women, infants, and children
- ⇒ MEDID restrictions

- ⇒ Bill 472—defense of marriage bill—oppose
- ⇒ Non-violence need to be a standard part of school curriculums
- ⇒ Women need to be seen as complete human beings vs. sexual beings
- ⇒ Women sports coverage in media
- ⇒ URGENT! Have the House come to vote on S. 2043 Gender Neutral Insurance